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# HIGH-SCHOOL GRAMMAR

## I. HISTORICAL SURVEY

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This paper is a consideration of the why, the what, and the how of high-school grammar. The three questions are, however, so closely related that an answer to the first suggests the method of attacking the other two. In the solution of the problems, the history of English-grammar teaching, an examination of the commonly stated aims of grammar instruction, statistical studies of the effects of English-grammar instruction, and the grammatical needs of actual, live high-school students provide the best data upon which to work.

A survey of the history of grammar instruction indicates the greatest variety of claims for the subject and suggests that grammatical material and method have usually depended on tradition rather than on the grammatical needs of society. At the outset grammar was, of course, vitally connected with the needs of the pupils studying it. Modern English grammar is a lineal descendant of the Greek grammar, which resulted from the sophists' investigation of the structure of the Greek language and the Alexandrian critics' examination of the language of Homer. Soon grammarians separated into two camps on the question of correctness. The analogists maintained that language is logical and that rules have no exceptions. The anomalists argued that custom is the only test and that rules are worthless unless they are based on custom. The verdict of posterity on this dispute was, "There's much to be said on both sides of the question," for, "You're both right, and you're both wrong." By the second century A.D., the grammarians had agreed that, although language is essentially logical in structure, every rule based on analogy has exceptions.

The first school grammar, written by Dionysius Thrax, a teacher of Greek in Rome in the time of Pompey the Great, was prepared to assist the Roman lad in his mastery of the Greek

language. Grammar in the days of Pompey the Great was a comprehensive term. Dionysius Thrax defined grammar as "an experimental knowledge of the usages of language as generally current among poets and prose writers." He divided grammar into six parts: prosody and phonology, figures, definitions and allusions, etymology, accident and syntax, and criticism of poetical productions. Grammar included material which school catalogues now call reading, literary criticism, politics, history, ethics, and philology. Although the subject-matter of grammar was gradually restricted, the power of tradition appears in the persistence of prosody. Prosody, like orthography, has little more right in a modern English grammar than politics or ethics, yet grammars still in use include prosody because it is useful information about poetry and does not seem to belong very definitely to any subject.

The first Latin grammars were less practical than the Greek because they were influenced by the Greek traditions, terminology, and language structure. The authors examined the structure of the Latin language and translated the technical terms of Greek grammar into Latin. Not only did the early Latin grammarians blunder in some of their translations, but they also followed the Greek models very closely despite the difference in structure of the two languages. Yet much of the Latin grammar was extremely practical, for it included, according to Quintilian, not only the study of language and literature, but also that of music, astronomy, and philosophy. Quintilian, however, defined grammar as "the art of speaking and writing the language with correctness and propriety."

During the Middle Ages the Latin grammar held sway. Gradually, however, the more practical parts were neglected, and the emphasis was placed on the formal aspects. The result was argument about the unimportant and quibbling over details. Yet Latin grammar, because it was necessary in learning the language of scholarship, held a prominent place in education.

Just as the early Latin grammars suffered from the Greek terminology and tradition, so the early English grammars followed slavishly their Latin models, although English language structure resembles Latin only slightly more than it resembles an isolating language like the Chinese or a polysynthetic language like that of

the American Indian. Although position rather than form determines the relation of words in English, the language had to fit into the ready-made Latin scheme. The first so-called English grammar, Colet's *Introduction to Lily's Latin Grammar*, was designed as an aid in the study of Latin. Lindley Murray's grammar, published in 1795, was the first real English grammar of wide use and influence. His definition follows Quintilian's: "English grammar is the art of speaking and writing the English language with propriety." The grammar presented etymology to be learned, rules to be memorized, sentences to be analyzed, words to be parsed, and faulty diction to be corrected. Murray borrowed freely from his predecessors. His simple language and smooth phrasing helped to popularize grammar and fix these early grammatical rules, traditions, and methods. Kirkham's grammar appeared in 1823 and gradually displaced Murray's. In method and material Kirkham followed Murray slavishly. The only originality of his book lies in the provision for an immediate application of all rules learned, a new and deadly system of parsing under which school-boys suffered for two generations, and some simple but dangerous methods of recognizing the parts of speech.

These two early English grammars set the fashion, and they suggest our grammatical inheritance. They show that the transfer of grammatical ideas and terminology from Latin to English, like the transfer from Greek to Latin, carried with it useless truth, untruth, and dangerous half-truth. The essential defect in these grammars is that one of the least-inflected languages in which "syntax has been enlarged at the expense of accident" is made to fit into the categories of a highly inflected language in which the form of words, not their order, determines their relation. The languages are fundamentally different, but early English grammars—and some modern ones too—are substantially like Latin grammars. Instead of making an independent examination of the structure of the English language, our early grammarians accepted the Latin grammar entire and then excluded only those functions, classes, inflections, and subdivisions which could not be forced upon the English language. The result was an English grammar unnecessarily complicated and at the same time inadequate.

Gradually, however, useless material was being eliminated; the dative case, the ablative case, and the agreement of adjective and noun were discarded. Just then the old faulty psychology helped to bolster up the complicated system of English grammar. Educators agreed that the mind is a field which will bring forth a hundred fold only after careful cultivation. The cultivator with the sharpest teeth is Latin grammar. It must be used on every field. English grammar is a useful tool in the cultivation of this field only when it goes almost as deep as Latin grammar. In other words, the value of grammar now depended upon its difficulty rather than upon its meeting the grammatical needs of the pupils. A corollary, of course, is that the more logical the grammatical system the more virtue it has as a discipline. All modernizing at this time was for the purpose of making English grammar a thoroughly logical and consistent system and thus increasing its efficiency as a disciplinary tool.

The more recent phases of English grammar had their origin in Green's *English Analysis*, published in 1847. This text laid emphasis on sentence construction and was the forerunner of our language lessons. Green retained the formal, routine parsing system, but, as the name of the text indicates, paid special attention to sentence analysis. Since Green's day some grammarians have regarded the subject as a deductive or an inductive science. A few have emphasized the application of grammatical principles to language. Grammar is, however, now generally considered the science which treats of word-forms and word-relations.

Even today English grammar has not completely escaped from its Greek-Latin inheritance of error and clumsiness. Carpenter, Baker, and Scott say:

Even now many teachers do not realize, so great is the hold of tradition, that English nouns rarely have gender and can scarcely be said to have more than two cases, that pure adjectives never agree with their substantives, and that verbs rarely agree with their subjects. It seems wise to do away, so far as possible, with all distinctions that apply to other languages but not to ours, and resolutely to look at our language in the light of fact.

Briefly, then, the history of grammar suggests that our textbook today is likely to be a compromise between the grammar of tradition and the grammar needed by the pupils.

Hoyt, after an examination of the statements of grammarians and educators, says that there is a remarkable consensus of opinion in the following claims for grammar: (1) grammar disciplines the mind; (2) grammar prepares for the study of other languages; (3) grammar gives command of an indispensable terminology; (4) grammar enables one to use better English; (5) grammar aids in the interpretation of literature.

Since Herbart's wrecking of the faculty or compartment theory of the mind, the thoroughgoing mental-discipline theory has occupied a conspicuous place on the pedagogical scrap heap. The burden of proof therefore seems to rest heavily on those who teach grammar as a discipline. But let us hear the case for grammar. Grammar, they tell us, develops memory, precision, concentration, and reasoning power. This mental power is applicable in any department of human activity.

Although the thoroughgoing discipline is rejected, ideas persist in pedagogy and the popular vocabulary long after they have been shown to be psychologically indefensible. Such current expressions as "a man of good mental ability," "a remarkable memory," "a clear thinker," and "a good reasoner" are the fossilized dogma in its thoroughgoing form.

Common observation seems to demonstrate that there is no such entity as general intellectual ability. A man may be a prodigy in mathematics and an ignoramus in literature and art; he may remember perfectly his Latin paradigms, logarithms, and Sanskrit, and forget regularly errands for his wife and important engagements; he may remember sights and forget sounds or forget sights and remember sounds; he may remember athletic records and forget poetry; he may excel in logic and calculus and fail in solving puzzles for children.

Moreover, functions of the mind like observation and attention do not seem to be generalized. A scientist may observe every bird and bug and overlook his wife's new bonnet. The Indian with remarkably keen eyes in the forest sees little in New York City. The Greeks jested about the philosopher who, while observing the stars, fell into a well. A soldier may be a hero in battle and a coward before an audience or in a drawing-room. A man's

resistance of the temptation to steal will probably have little effect on his tendency to overeat. In addition, development along one line apparently may interfere with other development, may make other lines of mental action more difficult or impossible. Darwin lost his sense of wonder, admiration, and reverence, and his enjoyment of art and literature because of "an atrophy of the part of the brain on which the higher tastes depend." Shakspeare has suggested this interference in mental functioning in "the native hue of resolution becomes sicklied o'er with a pale cast of thought."

Empirical studies have supported the inferences of theory and observation. Norsworthy's experiments with school children indicated that accuracy in spelling is independent of accuracy in arithmetic. Dr. Scripture found that the quickness acquired in fencing is not transferable to other mental activity. Squire discovered that requiring neat papers in arithmetic did not improve the appearance of the English and spelling papers. Likewise Lewis, at Dartmouth, found that the best mathematical reasoners were below the average in practical reasoning, and that half of the ablest law students had stood very low in mathematics. Briggs took the statement that grammar is "an elementary part of logic, the beginning of the thinking process," and from a thoroughly scientific investigation concluded that the training in grammar does not improve the pupils' ability to see likenesses and differences, to test a definition, to apply a definition, to make a rule or a definition, to select the essential, or to reason in other fields.

On the other hand, a host of experimental psychologists have produced conclusive evidence of cerebral interrelation and interdependence, of the disciplinary value of knowledge and training. Scripture, Davis, Ebert and Meumann, Winch, Coover and Angell, Thorndike and Woodworth, Judd, Münsterberg, and Ruediger are some of the psychologists whose experiments have demonstrated the possibility of joint improvement or of reciprocal interference as a result of training. Ruediger, for example, to test the possibility of a generalization of habit, attacked the problem of neatness which Squire had previously studied. In his experiment, the ideal of neatness was set before the class in connection with establishing the

habit in the one subject. When the habit was thus raised to clear consciousness, neater papers in all subjects resulted. Ruediger concludes, "Neatness made conscious as an ideal or aim in connection with only one school subject does function in other subjects." Ebert and Meumann found that practice in memorizing nonsense syllables functioned in increased rapidity in memorizing poetry, prose, letters, signs, and nonsense tables. Winch's interesting experiments showed that improvement in memorizing poetry is partly transferred to memory work in geography and history.

Functional psychology's explanations of the fact that knowledge and training have an effect on subsequent mental action are various. James emphasizes the method of recording facts; Bagley and Ruediger rely on the development of ideals; Angell emphasizes concentration; Thorndike's explanation, the "common or identical elements" theory, in its broadest sense includes all others. The identities, of course, may be in either substance or method.

What then is the conclusion of the whole matter? The pendulum assuredly swung too far when psychologists proclaimed that knowledge and training have no disciplinary value. Again discipline is more a matter of method than of subject. In other words, any subject well taught has disciplinary value. Further, as no one knows definitely what study is likely to result in the greatest transfer of ability, practical utility rather than assumed training value should be the criterion in the selection of subject-matter. Heck, in his volume on formal discipline, says, "The emphasis put upon a given element in school should reflect the emphasis put upon it in the environment." The pupil should be trained in the material of the actual world rather than in something else which may or may not affect his later mental operations.

Moreover, the Dartmouth tests and the investigation of Briggs throw the gravest doubt upon the possibility of a transfer from the abstract reasoning of formal grammar to the concrete reasoning of practical life. Probably the boy who can reason out that "red" in the sentence, "John painted the town red," is an objective complement, is not therefore more likely to consider consequences before painting the town. The man who knows that "night" in the sentence, "It rained all night," is an adverbial objective, has



not gained any power in solving the practical problem of deciding whether it is wise to carry an umbrella. Likewise the boy who knows that "when" in the sentence, "I didn't know what to do with my nickel when the conductor failed to collect," is a conjunctive adverb and not a conjunction, has probably gained no power in the solution of the ethical problem thrust upon him by the oversight of the conductor. In short, use in practical life rather than assumed disciplinary value is the test to which grammatical material must be subjected.

Hoyt's remaining four purposes fall under the head of practical utility and may be treated more briefly. His second and third purposes of grammar are to prepare for other language study and to teach an indispensable terminology. Admittedly any terms useful in the out-of-school life of the average pupil ought to be taught. Such a list of terms, however, is neither long nor formidable, and is necessary in teaching grammar for use. Special attention need not, therefore, be centered on teaching grammatical terminology.

Just how far the English teacher is responsible to the teacher of foreign languages for a firm grammatical foundation is a more difficult problem. As foreign-language study usually begins in the first year of high school, preparation of the pupil for foreign-language study is a problem of the grammar-school teacher and is outside the province of this paper. The related high-school question is whether in the first term there should be a study of technical English grammar to facilitate the mastery of the grammar of some foreign tongue.

In answering this question, we must not forget that many high-school pupils either do not study a foreign language or do not pursue the work long enough to make the study of any practical value. The new course of study for the New York City high schools makes all foreign-language study elective. Many commercial high schools no longer require a foreign language. Educators and the public are just beginning to realize that the smattering of foreign languages doled out to the average high-school pupil has little social, vocational, intellectual, or cultural value. This "average pupil" has at graduation neither the ability to use the

language studied nor the will to learn to use it, and straightway unloads this surplus intellectual baggage. In general, learning one day material to be forgotten the next and never to be recalled is both the loss of a golden opportunity and a criminal waste of time. But that is another story. A large group of high-school pupils too are eliminated. In New York City one-third of the pupils entering high school drop out during the first year; one out of nine is graduated. Democracy in education requires the adjusting of grammatical instruction to the needs, not only of the pupils who study a foreign language and are graduated, but also of those who do not take a foreign language or are eliminated after a term or a year. In other words, a democratic conception of the high school suggests such an arrangement of the curriculum that a pupil who remains only a term or a year will secure a training which has social and vocational value. A corollary of this proposition is that the first-year high-school course should be practical or functional grammar rather than formal grammar presented for its disciplinary value or its value as a preparation for foreign-language study. And if the formal grammar is not studied in the first year, such study will have little effect on the foreign-language study.

In the second place, the English language, although not a "grammarless tongue," has a grammar of its own. The inflections have dropped off, and syntax depends upon position. Mrs. Jacobs, in her *Primary Education*, says, "English grammar is atrophied, and as unsuitable as a field wherein to learn the principles of grammar as the hoof of a horse would be as a model for the study of feet."

Another claim for grammar is that it aids in the interpretation of literature. To test this contention, Hoyt searched long for a suitable passage. He decided that grammatical analysis might be useful in interpreting the passage in Gray's "Elegy" beginning, "Perhaps in this neglected spot." He found no higher correlation between grammar and interpretation than between grammar and geography or any two unrelated subjects. He concluded that most pupils interpret absolutely regardless of grammar.

Moreover, some maintain that the notion that grammar is of assistance in extracting thought from the printed page is based on a

poor understanding of mental operations. The claim is that the order is thought-getting, then grammatical analysis, not vice versa. At least it is true that many teachers of English grammar insist that pupils find the thought before attempting to analyze.

Hoyt's investigation, although not broad enough in its scope to be conclusive, at least suggests a fundamental weakness in most grammar instruction. Most pupils look upon analysis as a useless assorting of the parts of a sentence into pigeonholes with meaningless labels, and regard diagramming as a puzzle picture of this useless assortment. And many of them enjoy the performance because they like puzzles. Jespersen says, "I think that the study of grammar is really more or less useless, but that it is extremely fascinating." The point is that analysis as practiced in the schools is so much a matter of mental gymnastics, so abstract, detailed, and formalized, and has such complicated, smooth-running machinery of its own that instead of being "the key of all knowledge" or "the analysis of the thinking process," it is a thing apart. Analysis is undoubtedly a useful tool, but should be practiced in the broader acceptance of the term with constant attention to thought-getting.

Hoyt completes his case against grammar "as is" with the discovery that the correlation between grammar and composition is no higher than the correlation between grammar and geography. In other words, his statistics tend to prove that grammar is not an aid to correct speaking and writing. On the same point Professor Whitney says, "No one ever changed from a bad speaker to a good one by applying the rules of grammar." Goethe explains his own method of learning languages in the passage: "Thus I had learned Latin, just like German, French, English, only through practice, without rule and without system." Superintendent Francis said recently, "Grammar, as taught, is a pedantic fetish, a wicked waste of time."

Although grammar is not a panacea for the ills of speech and writing, a proper presentation of the subject furnishes necessary criteria for testing word-relations and aids in forming correct habits. Probably the boy whose environment and reading have given him correct English as a habit has little need of the

conventional grammatical tests of correctness as long as he associates only with cultured people and well-written books. For him exercises in false syntax might be just a little worse than useless. For the ordinary youth, however, who out of school hears ungrammatical, slangy, slovenly speech and who, the gods have decreed, must pass his days largely in this unwholesome English environment, precept and practice, which will make the correct form habitual, will make the pupil a self-critic, and will save him from unconscious absorption of the bad English he hears, are invaluable. Such a pupil must become grammar-conscious, must have his ear and mind so sensitized that an error in grammar will jar or grate as much as a harsh voice or a midnight feline melody. This too is the answer to Jespersen's statement, "When the mind is occupied with a word as a grammatical phenomenon, the mind's power of calling forth ideas is, of course, lessened to a considerable degree." Of course, the critical faculty should not be so overdeveloped as to inhibit freedom of expression; but, as Hinsdale has phrased it, "It will not answer to allow bad grammar to run riot in the name of spontaneity." The solution is to make good grammar so thoroughly a matter of the nervous system that without the pupil's taking thought the jolt will come as surely from a grammatical error as from an unexpected step in the dark.

In the solution of the high-school grammar problem, what help, then, have we gained from a review of the history of grammar and an examination of the commonly stated aims of grammar, especially in the light of the statistical studies of the effects of English-grammar instruction? The survey has only three suggestions: (1) avoid viewing English grammar through Latin eyes; (2) grammar's assumed disciplinary value, its terminology, and its value to some in foreign-language study do not justify it as a subject in a democratic high school; (3) grammar in the high school must, therefore, be taught primarily as an aid in understanding involved sentences and in speaking and writing correctly.